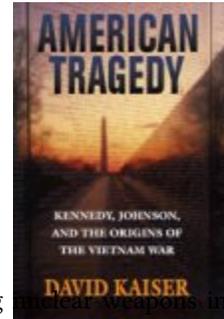


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Kaiser. *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000. 558 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00225-8.

Reviewed by Edwin Moise (Clemson University)
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Note: H-Diplo recently ran a roundtable in which they reviewed David Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. The roundtable participants are Lloyd Gardner, George C. Herring, and Edwin Moise. This review is part of that roundtable.

David Kaiser presents here a great deal of useful information about the way policies were formed at the upper levels of the U.S. government from 1961 to 1965. Much of it new, based on very thorough archival research. Repeatedly, looking at a summary of a document I found surprising and unfamiliar, I checked the endnote, and discovered he had found it in an archive I had never consulted.

The most valuable part of the book is chapters 13-15, where Kaiser traces the final stages of Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war on a massive scale. I have doubts (see below) that the decision to commit ground troops was really as firm, in December 1964, as Kaiser considers it to have been. But he is very convincing in describing how during 1965, the president habitually concealed decisions about escalation of the war even from fairly high-level officials such as George Ball and William Bundy, giving an impression that he was debating issues that in fact had long since been decided. This adds credibility to his claim that the key decision had actually been made in late 1964. Even if the December 1964 decision was a bit more tentative than Kaiser suggests, it was very important, and Kaiser's discussion of it an important addition to the literature.

Other issues on which I found Kaiser particularly illuminating are:

-The fact that U.S. military leaders wanted and ex-

pected to have the option of using Indochina, if the situation there seemed to be getting out of hand, pops up repeatedly at various points in the book. Often the language in which this was expressed in the documents was veiled, but I think Kaiser is correct in his assertions that this veiled language actually referred to nuclear weapons.

-The extent to which disturbing facts about the military situation in Vietnam, which showed clearly in the weekly reports from the U.S. command in Saigon, were ignored in high-level discussion in Washington during the last months of the Kennedy administration. Kaiser's discussion of this is detailed enough to be convincing and useful. He concludes, and I see no reason to doubt him, that President Kennedy never realized how badly the situation was deteriorating (p. 277).

-Discussion of the way General Nguyen Khanh obtained American permission before going ahead with his coup in January 1964, which overthrew the generals who had replaced Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 (pp. 297-98).

Problems with the book:

1) Kaiser has a tendency to treat the drawing up of a plan as if it were a commitment to carry out that plan. This appears for the first time on p. 122, when he refers to Robert McNamara, in 1962, "setting a firm time limit" on the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam. On p. 186 this is referred to as a "deadline." I can see no support in Kaiser's evidence for this phrasing. McNamara was directing that plans be drawn up for an American withdrawal, but there was nothing even faintly firm about these.

Kaiser discusses (pp. 376-77) a plan drawn up in late November and early December 1964, approved on De-

ember 2, according to which, when the United States began systematic bombing of North Vietnam, the United States would also deploy significant ground troop units to South Vietnam. The 3d Marine Division would be on its way to Vietnam two days after the bombing began, and would take 33 days to arrive. The 173d Airborne Brigade would arrive even faster, within 29 days of the beginning of the bombing. He says (p. 377) that when Johnson actually did order the bombing (Operation Rolling Thunder) in 1965, “the initial troops movements into South Vietnam went off like clockwork.” This is not true. The bombing began March 2. The 3d Marine Division and the 173d Airborne Brigade each took a bit more than two months to arrive in Vietnam, not the 33 days and 29 days projected by the plan.

This leads into a broader issue, on which Kaiser seems seriously inconsistent. Much of the time, Kaiser treats the plan drawn up in 1964 as having become U.S. policy on December 2, 1964, a done deal. He often suggests that later policy discussions of what should be done in Vietnam were simply window-dressing, the Johnson Administration going through the motions of decision-making in order to conceal the fact that the decisions had already been made. Sometimes this is convincing. But the sections of the December 1964 plan describing the schedule for arrival of American ground troops were not followed in 1965, and it didn’t even take a decision to deviate from them. The government did not seem to remember, in March 1965, that there had been any decision in December 1964 about what U.S. units were to arrive on what schedule. Kaiser, having given the misleading impression (quote above) that the troop movement sections of the 1964 plan had been carried out as written, later describes in detail how the U.S. government decided in 1965, utterly without regard to the relevant paragraphs of the 1964 plan, what units to send to Vietnam on what dates. I think this implies that the meetings in 1965 that decided to implement other sections of the 1964 plan may not have been pure window-dressing; perhaps the U.S. government had not been so firmly committed to any part of the plan, in December 1964, that implementation could simply be assumed in 1965.

2) Kaiser defined his interests pretty clearly in the title he chose for his new book, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. This is a study of American policy, not Vietnam. There is sometimes a remarkable neglect of what the Vietnamese were doing, even when it was clearly relevant to American actions.

This first becomes conspicuous in the chapter devoted to the coup that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. There is a lot of discussion of conflicting American views of the attitudes of key Vietnamese military officers, whether most of them were ready to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem, to what extent they supported the government’s attack on the Buddhist pagodas, and so forth. Kaiser does not say much about who was right and who was wrong in these disputes, what was actually happening among the Vietnamese. Astonishingly, the notes to this chapter do not contain a single source citation to the memoirs of any of the Vietnamese involved in these events. The memoirs of General Tran Van Don, the coup plotters’ main liaison with the Americans, would have been particularly useful.

In the section devoted to the American debates of late 1964 and early 1965, over escalation of the war, one sees numerous comments on the question of whether proposed American actions would be likely to provoke Hanoi to send North Vietnamese units into South Vietnam. There is not a hint that while these discussions were going on, the first North Vietnamese regiments were already on their way south. By December 1964 the 95th Regiment had arrived in South Vietnam, and the 32d and 101st were on the way. The first date at which Kaiser mentions North Vietnamese troops in the South is June 1965 (p. 441).

Miscellaneous minor comments:

p. 12 states incorrectly that in 1954, the United States pledged to respect the Geneva Accords of July 1954.

I think a bit more detail was really needed about the implications of the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos: both what the United States expected to result from them, and what actually did result from them. In particular, I don’t think Kaiser makes it as clear as he should that the United States complied with the accords, in the months immediately after they were signed, much better than Hanoi did. On the other hand, I am grateful to Kaiser for actually footnoting a source for the promise by Pushkin, the Soviet representative in Geneva, that the Soviet Union would ensure Hanoi complied with the accords. I had heard of this commitment, but never seen it supported by a specific documentary source.

p. 166 states that Sam Adams inherited an intelligence estimate showing 100,000 Viet Cong guerrillas, and revised it upward to 500,000. The figure Adams inherited hadn’t been nearly as low as 100,000.

p. 207 refers to Quang Tri province as being in II

Corps. It was in I Corps.

p. 232 states that when State Department officials W. Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman decided in August 1963 to encourage a coup, they were under the influence of reporting by New York Times reporter David Halberstam, who had been portraying the ARVN generals as being on the verge of a coup. p. 243 makes this clearer, saying Halberstam had reported “that the generals all . . . wanted to go ahead [with a coup].” In both cases, the impression is conveyed that Kaiser is reminding readers of what they had seen on earlier pages, when he had discussed actual reports Halberstam had published on specific dates. But I could not recall seeing any such thing on the pages in which Halberstam’s actual reports had been detailed, and when I went back and looked, I could not find such a thing on those pages. Had there been an actual Halberstam report saying the generals all wanted to go ahead with a coup? I am not sure.

Why is it that almost every discussion I read of the Tonkin Gulf incidents has to have at least one wrong date in it? p. 331 says that the USS Maddox was scheduled to reach the North Vietnamese coast on August 1, 1964; the correct date is July 30 (around noon of that day). p. 339 says that Zhou Enlai sent a cable to Ho Chi Minh on August 5, one day after the U.S. air strikes on North Viet-

nam. This was not one day after, it was the day of the strikes, which were on the afternoon of August 5. These two wrong dates are not extraordinary carelessness; they are close to par for the course, in discussions of Tonkin Gulf.

p. 440 states that the size of the Chinese forces in North Vietnam eventually reached more than 300,000 men. This is a misunderstanding. The number of Chinese who at one time or another were in North Vietnam was over 300,000. The highest level at any single time was about 170,000.

p. 491 states that General Westmoreland “stopped” the combined action platoon program. This is an exaggeration; Westmoreland restrained the growth of the program, but did not come close to stopping it.

Finally, while I appreciate Dr. Kaiser’s very kind comments about my book on the Tonkin Gulf incidents (pp. 334, 542n56), I would be grateful if he would try to get the publisher to correct my name on pp. 334 and 563 in future printings. I am Edwin Moise, not Edmund Moise.

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